

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-4402

September 19, 2017

PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE

COMMITTEES:

FINANCE  
CHAIRMAN

JUDICIARY

HEALTH, EDUCATION,  
LABOR, AND PENSIONS

AGING

JOINT COMMITTEE  
ON TAXATION

Dear Friend,

This summer was a season of extreme political division. In August, a white supremacist used his vehicle to mow down innocent demonstrators at a violent protest in Charlottesville, Virginia. Weeks before, an active shooter attempted to assassinate members of Congress at an early morning baseball practice in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. Days earlier, a man spewing anti-Muslim hate speech fatally stabbed two individuals on public transport in Portland, Oregon.

Events such as these add to the growing sense that something has broken in our politics. Something that once moderated our partisan feelings and bridled our baser instincts has gone missing in an era of unprecedented polarization. Something fundamental to our civic culture has been lost amid the chaos and disruption of the Information Age.

The question is, *What has been lost?*

In a word: civility.

Civility is the indispensable political norm. It is the public virtue that has greased the wheels of our democracy since its inception. Although nowhere mandated in our Constitution, civility is no less essential to the proper functioning of our government than any amendment, court ruling, or act of Congress. Without it, little separates us from the cruelty and chaos of rule by force.

For decades, civility has acted as the levee protecting our society from its own worst impulses. But that levee now shows signs of strain as political passions spill over into open violence.

In the wake of Charlottesville and the attack on members of Congress, I have reflected at length on the circumstances that led us to this point. While it may be difficult to trace the erosion of civility to any single factor, one thing is certain: Our nation cannot continue on its current path. Either we remain passive observers to the problem, or we endeavor to act, to make the necessary changes—in ourselves, in our families, and in our communities—that will lead to a more civil, prosperous society.

Restoring civility to the public square won't happen overnight—but it *must* happen.

The first step is to speak responsibly.

Our words have consequences, and in an age of retweets, viral videos, and shareable content, those words often echo well beyond their intended audience and context. It's incumbent on all of us, then—from the President to Congress on down—to be responsible for our speech.

I will be the first to admit to saying things over the course of my public service that I later came to regret. In the heat of an argument, it's easy to indulge in irresponsible rhetoric. But we must avoid this temptation. Whether in town halls, casual conversations with neighbors, or posts on social media, we must likewise refrain from dehumanizing, demeaning, or unfairly disparaging the other side. And we must resist the impulse to frame every tiny policy disagreement as a zero-sum struggle for the soul of the country. We must restore sense, decency, and proportion to our political speech.

The second step is practicing media mindfulness.

Just as the food we eat affects the body, the information we consume affects the mind. The daily consumption of media that presents only one political viewpoint—whether conservative or liberal—cocoons the mind in a safely sealed ideological echo chamber. An imbalanced media diet

shrinks our perception of reality, which in turn limits our capacity for empathy and our ability to engage civilly with others.

To better understand how the other side thinks and feels, we must make a conscious effort to diversify our media intake. This exercise in empathy may not heal decades-old political divisions or usher in a post-partisan age. But it will at least help us break free from party groupthink and be better prepared to engage in civil debate with friends and neighbors.

The next step toward civility is to venture beyond the comfortable confines of our social circles.

Americans today are much less likely to marry, date, or even live near people of the opposing party. Increasingly, we sort ourselves by ideology and lifestyle—a phenomenon that only strengthens polarization over time.

How can we expect to engage politically with members of the opposing party if we don't even interact socially with one another? Like limiting our media consumption, only associating with those who hold our same values and opinions distorts our perception of the other side. It has an "othering" effect so severe that members of opposing parties—freedom-loving men and women who share the same country and many of the same values—increasingly see each other as enemies.

In the spirit of civility, we would all do well to make friends with members of the opposite party. Doing so requires us to look beyond the horizon of our differences to find common ground.

It's on us to reinvigorate the public discourse by recommitting ourselves to the virtues of compassion, comity, and compromise. It's on us to renew the soul of our nation through the politics of civility.

I hope you will join me in this cause.

Stacy Smith